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SUBJECT: LIBERIA: LAWMAKER CAUSES STIR AT TRC HEARING, COMMISSIONER
WALKS OUT

REF: STATE 112101

¶1. (U) SUMMARY: Margibi County lawmaker Saah R. Gbollie accused TRC Commissioner John H.T. Stewart of being a cause of the Liberian crisis at the ongoing Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) hearing. Representative Gbollie, testifying before the TRC, denied that he had committed any atrocities while he was a senior commander in Taylor's National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL) during the Liberian crisis and commander of the police Special Operations Division (SOD) during Taylor's Presidency. The Commissioner walked out during the testimony. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (U) Representative Saah R. Gbollie was invited by the TRC as part of the ongoing Thematic Hearings of the TRC which began in August 2008. Representative Gbollie denied all allegations levied against him at the TRC. Other TRC witnesses have accused him of ordering the execution of 17 ULIMO-K prisoners of war captured by NPFL in Lofa County in 1993. He denied any knowledge of the Phebe Hospital Massacre in 1994 when scores of civilians were allegedly killed by NPFL fighters under his control. Gbollie also denied throwing a street seller into the Mesurado River to his death in Monrovia when he served as commander of the Special Operations Division of the Liberia National Police (LNP) in 2001. He also denied personal involvement in the beating of university students in March 2001 during a demonstration but stated the "best appropriate means" were used to arrest the student leadership. Gbollie instead called on TRC commissioners to ask leaders of the NPFL and the LNP to answer to the allegations because according to him "he was only a small boy who did nothing wrong" and a "mere gun toter" who was not a commander in the war and "never ordered the execution of people".

¶3. (U) Gbollie blamed the Liberian crisis on members of the Progressive Alliance of Liberia (PAL) and Movement for Justice in Africa (MOJA). He said that they were wholly and solely responsible for the Liberian civil war. Representative Gbollie directly accused TRC Commissioner Stewart of being a part of PAL/MOJA. He said that "Stewart's hands are equally dirty just as everyone else." Gbollie warned that the TRC was not a tribunal and as such should not be used by men like Stewart to get at their perceived enemies. He threatened to disrupt the October 20 hearing if Commissioner Stewart continued his "intransigence he displayed against previous witnesses who testified before the TRC." Commissioner Stewart walked out of the Hall despite efforts by Chairman Verdier and other commissioners to calm him down.

¶4. (U) The hearings continued after the Commissioner walked out. Gbollie then apologized to Chairman Verdier and other commissioners on the panel but continued his vilification of Stewart. Gbollie said that he joined the NPFL to help bring about positive change in Liberia. Gbollie denied doing any wrong during the Liberian crisis and challenged anyone who had any case against him to take him to a court of competent jurisdiction.

¶5. (SBU) COMMENT: Representative Gbollie's show of disrespect for the TRC is one of the strongest examples of contempt so far by witnesses appearing before it. Previous witnesses have also accused TRC Commissioners of playing active roles during the civil war in an attempt to absolve themselves of any wrong-doing, but no testimony

has ever escalated to the accusatory level this interchange did. TRC Chairman Jerome Verdier's failure to reprimand Gbollie and control the situation before it led to the walkout of Commissioner Stewart raises concerns about the management of the public hearings.

The International Contact Group on Liberia's TRC working group has privately counseled Verdier on his repeated failure to control witnesses because allowing former rebels to pontificate for hours from the TRC stage is undermining the public perception of the effectiveness of the TRC hearings. Saah Gbollie was recently refused entry to the U.S. after his visa was prudentially revoked by the Department on September 26 (reftel).

THOMAS-GREENFIELD